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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000666

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MCDERMOTT
PARIS FOR WALLER
LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: SPANISH FOREIGN MINISTER "GETS TOUGH" WITH SARG

REF: MADRID 988

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 band d.

11. (C) Summary: The September 17 visit to Damascus of Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos, portrayed by the Spanish Embassy as an opportunity for Spain to "get tough" with the SARG, lasted less than a day. Moratinos held short meetings with President Asad and Foreign Minister Muallem and principally discussed the possible visit of Spanish PM Zapatero. Additionally, Moratinos conveyed to the SARG Israel's willingness to continue indirect peace talks, Spanish support for whatever approach the French take with respect to an Association Agreement, Spain's desire for the SARG to press Iran on the acceptance of oversight by the international community of Iran's nuclear program and Spain's pleasure with the progress of the normalization of Syrian and Lebanese relations. For its part, the SARG registered its displeasure with the elevated position of Israel in the proposed Union for the Mediterranean and suggested that the international community adopt a less accusatory tone in dealing with Iran. The Spanish hinted that this visit, was in part, an effort to mend fences after the apparent hostile reaction of the SARG in the wake of the June 22 open-letter signed by Moratinos and two other EU foreign ministers which detailed the steps the SARG would need to take in order to bring itself back into the international fold. Finally, the Spanish reported the EU had no common effort or position on Syria, despite noted similarities in the messages conveyed to the SARG by French President Sarkozy during his early September visit and this recent visit of Moratinos. End Summary.

12. (C) Spanish DCM Javier Colomina told PolOff that the Spanish FM's September 21 visit lasted just under twenty hours, during which Moratinos met separately with President Asad and FM Muallem. According to Colomina, the visit with Asad lasted roughly thirty minutes and the meeting with Muallem just over an hour and was followed by a joint press conference. Moratinos reported to Spanish Embassy staff that both Muallem and Asad were "feeling strong," particularly in the wake of the recent visit of French President Sarkozy. Colomina reported that Moratinos has an excellent professional and personal relationship with Muallem and the Spanish Embassy assessed that Muallem had been able to consolidate his position within the regime principally due to apparent foreign policy successes in recent months. Colomina explained that the purpose of minister's visit was to illustrate that Spain has and will continue to be a friend to Syria but that such a friendship is not unconditional, that Moratinos was here in effect to "get tough" with the SARG.

PM Zapatero Set to Visit

13. (C) Colomina confirmed press reporting that PM Jose Louis Zapatero is interested in visiting Damascus sometime in mid-to-late November, but added that the SARG should not assume the visit is a foregone conclusion as progress on Israeli/Syrian peace talks and even the outcome of the U.S. elections would ultimately dictate whether or not such a visit would be useful, adding that the Prime Minister will not come to Damascus if there is nothing for him to do. Colomina said his government had agreed in principal to such a visit in August but has only now made the intention publicly known. Colomina added that he personally believes, absent a major misstep by the SARG, Zapatero will be visiting Damascus in November.

Syrian/Israeli Peace Talks

14. (C) Prior to visiting Damascus, Moratinos met with Israeli FM Tzipi Livni, according to Colomina. Based on Moratinos' meeting with Livni he conveyed to Asad and Muallem that Livni was "positive" on the continuation of indirect peace talks with Syria and that the 5th round of talks would proceed, "Israel just needs some time," Moratinos reportedly told the SARG. Moratinos also reported to Spanish Embassy staff that if Israel responds positively to the questions posed by Syria

DAMASCUS 00000666 002 OF 003

in the fourth round of negotiations, then he expects direct talks to commence in short order.

On Iran

15. (C) According to Colomina, Moratinos noted the special nature of Syria's strategic partnership with Iran and asked that Syria push the Iranians to adopt a more constructive stance towards the international community with respect to Iran's nuclear program. Moratinos reportedly told the SARG that he hoped Syria could play a constructive role in moving Iran into line with international standards which call for proper oversight of said programs. The SARG responded that the international community must adopt a less accusatory approach on this issue if the international community expects to see any movement from the Iranian side.

Union for the Mediterranean

16. (C) The SARG reportedly expressed their displeasure to Moratinos at the proposed structure of the Union for the Mediterranean. Muallem suggested that the SARG was not happy with the "new face" of the project, principally Israel's elevated role, adding that it would be impossible for Syria to negotiate with Israel on trade issues absent broader Arab concurrence on the matter.

Association Agreement

17. (C) Colomina said Moratinos had little to say on this matter, reportedly telling the SARG that Spain will support whatever plan the French put forward.

All's Well With Lebanon

¶8. (C) Moratinos, according to Colomina, was happy with Syria's efforts with respect to Lebanon and expressed Spain's desire to see a normalization between the two countries continue unabated.

SARG Upset Over Joint Letter Sent by EU Foreign Ministers

¶9. (C) Asked about the progress being made with respect to the bench marks outlined in the June 22 open joint-letter from German, Italian and Spanish FMs to FM Muallem, Colomina reported that Syria's negative reaction to the letter surprised his country. Colomina explained that his country has been trying to "calm the situation" since the release of the letter, hinting that Moratinos' visit may have been part of the calming strategy.

No EU Consensus on Syria

¶10. (C) PolOff noted the similarities in the messages delivered to the SARG by French President Sarkozy in early September to those of Spanish FM Moratinos, Colomina responded that there is no common effort or position within the EU with regard to Syria.

¶11. (C) Comment: Spanish claims of Moratinos' "toughness" with the SARG lacked any substantiation. As recently as September 15 Ambassador Satterfield briefed the Spanish Foreign Ministry on the dangers posed to Iraq by foreign fighter networks that operate with impunity within Syria and suggested that Spain challenge Asad to act constructively on this matter (reftel), yet the Spanish apparently failed to "get tough" with the SARG on this critical point. The lack of substantive discussions suggest that Moratinos' mission to Damascus was little more than a primer for the upcoming visit of Spanish PM Zapatero. Separately, while Muallem's star

DAMASCUS 00000666 003 OF 003

may be on the rise as the Spanish suggest, Vice President Shara'a, who was not present in any of the meetings as he had been in previous visits, may signal a decline in hard-liner VP Shara's involvement in foreign policy matters. End
Comment.
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